

California Working Forest Plans to Cover up to 15,000 Acres

California's Forest Practices Act and rules are widely seen as the most restrictive—and expensive to comply with—in the nation. For many owners of private timberlands, paying thousands or tens of thousands of dollars to develop a Timber Harvest Plan (THP) is difficult or impossible. To help reduce planning costs for individuals and families, the state in 1989 allowed private landowners with fewer than 2,500 acres to use Non-Industrial Timber Management Plans (NTMPs) instead of THPs. With a NTMP, landowners prepare a single long-term management plan, under which they must use only uneven-aged management and provide for long-term sustained yield. They must notify the state of any timber harvests, but do not need to file additional harvest plan documents. To date, 763 NTMPs have been approved by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire), covering a total of about 315,000 acres.

On September 9, the California legislature approved a bill authorizing Working Forest Management Plans (WFMP), which are similar to NTMPs, but cover ownerships up to 15,000 acres. The bill passed with only one vote—the Senate approved the bill 35 to 1, the Assembly 76 to 0. On October 8, Gov. Jerry Brown signed the bill into law.

In comparison to NTMPs, WFMPs allow more time for public review of plans before they are approved and require landowners to conduct more-rigorous inventory and reporting to verify uneven-aged management and sustained yield, interagency reviews to ensure compliance every five years, and more-rigorous plan amendment and timber operations notice protocols.

WFMPs also include a “no net loss” provision for late-successional stands of 10 acres or larger.

Once approved, both NTMPs and WFMPs are valid indefinitely and may be transferred to a new owner upon the sale of the property. A NTMP or WFMP holder may terminate the plan at any time; likewise, the state may revoke a plan for noncompliance.

“Hopefully, the Working Forest Management Plans

will provide some certainty and stability for landowners, not to mention an incentive to keep their lands as working forests instead of looking at alternative uses of their land,” said Bill Keye, government affairs specialist for the California Licensed Foresters Association, which was a strong proponent of WFMPs. The bill also garnered support from the Forest Landowners of California, among other groups.

Not all landowners will want or be able to apply for a WFMP.

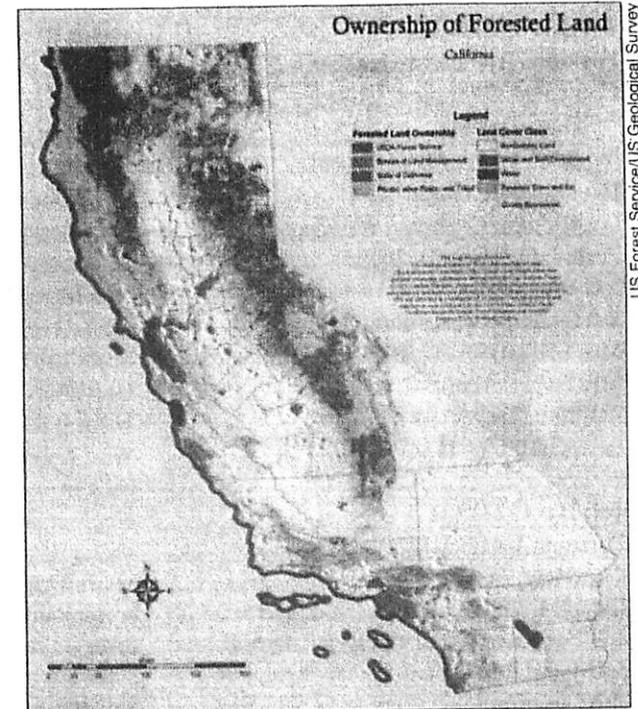
“This is a large undertaking for landowners,” said Keye, an SAF member. “They’ll have to do a very comprehensive and costly plan at the beginning of the process, one that’s certainly going to be more expensive than a THP. However, once they have gone through the process and gotten approval, they’ll go through a much-simplified ministerial process when they want to harvest their timber. They’ll also have a valuable document that can be passed along if they sell the land, as long as the new owner agrees to abide by the plan.”

Keye said that support for the legislation from moderate environmental groups was crucial.

“We had a lot of interaction with the environmental community about what their concerns were, and that’s ultimately what led to the passage of the law,” he said. “We had opposition from some environmental groups, but we had significant support from some groups such as The Nature Conservancy, Pacific Forest Trust, the Trust For Public Land, and others. Those groups stepped up and supported the bill, and that made a huge difference.”

On September 20, Pablo Garza, The Nature Conservancy’s associate director, state policy and external affairs, sent a letter of support for the bill to Assembly member Wesley Chesbro, author of the bill.

“This proposal will make sustainable forest management more economically feasible while maintaining environmental protection standards to keep our valuable forest ecosystems intact,” wrote Garza. “The WFMP requires landowners to practice ‘uneven-aged management’ (instead of clearcutting), develop an erosion control plan,



About 9 million (light green) of the 33 million acres of forest in California are owned by individuals and families.

and requires ‘no net loss’ of old-growth forest stands.”

The Center for Biological Diversity, one of several groups that submitted testimony in opposition to the bill, expressed concern that the advent of WFMPs “dramatically increases both the environmental impacts associated with logging operations and the problems related to the lack of oversight associated with a lifetime permit.”

Keye said the WFMPs would be a viable option for many landowners.

“We currently have about 315,000 acres under NTMPs,” he said. “With WFMPs, we could easily double or triple that in the coming 10 or 20 years.”